Dear Colleagues:

This week, we realized the one-year observance of school closures across the region and state. While there was much we didn’t know at the time, it was certain that we needed to pause in-person for an extended period. Our BOCES had long prepared for continuity of operations by preparing plans and practicing scenarios. However, the impact of this crisis was (and remains) beyond anything we could have ever imagined, but the act of planning and implementing has made us stronger and more resilient.

Please watch my weekly video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiJBTBevRwo

I reflect on our school closure week, the extension of remote learning and operations for the rest of the school year, and our efforts to work together to reopen our offices and buildings. At Tuesday’s town hall, we looked back and looked ahead to the future (and a spring that feels like a rebirth in many ways).

One year later, we are one year stronger, more resilient, and connected as a BOCES thanks to you. Please visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsiHo8i7g14&t=27s for a special video produced in recognition of the one-year observance.

There is much worth celebrating. Since September, our programs have been back in-person 5 days/week for approximately 80 percent of our students. We have expanded our relationships with our families, school leaders, and county health departments throughout this time. One year later, we continue many of the strategies and tactics implemented last March, including weekly Zooms with the county health departments and twice a week meetings with the superintendents and others.

It has been a long and busy 12 months and I know this journey has not been easy. Staff have worked creatively and collaboratively to develop new ways of teaching and working. This includes expanded relationships with families and school leaders. Some of our staff are teaching in-person and remote learners simultaneously. In many ways, the work is more challenging, and it often feels like we can’t keep up.

Others have had to quarantine multiple times due to close contact. This takes a toll on us – the worry about being exposed and becoming infected – and the disruption to our lives. Fortunately, we have not seen the feared transmission within buildings. Our cases have come from community spread.

We also have health and safety, communications, and nursing staff who have worked nights, weekends, and holidays on COVID-19. From mid-November to mid-January, this was an everyday task except for a few days. A special thank you to all who continued to meet these daily challenges regardless of the day of week or time of
I hope you can see now why it was so important to come back in-person for our students, districts and for ourselves. We see how difficult it is for many school systems across the country who have been closed for more than a year – and the toll on students and families.

Ultimately, in-person is the best place for our students though we recognize and respect a family’s choice to have their child remote during the pandemic. On behalf of our board, I want to thank everyone for all the additional work you have done to support our students, districts, and each other over the past year. You were flexible, adaptive, and patient – and you helped us give our students and districts the best experience possible under the difficult and unimaginable circumstances.

Over the past week, I have had the pleasure of sharing our experiences in presentations, panel discussions, and media interviews. This Week in Education interviewed me about our reopening efforts as more schools across the country seek a return to in-person instruction. You can watch at https://www.questar.org/2021/03/16/reopening-schools-successfully/.

While we closed schools across the region and state on March 18, 2020, a year later to the day, we announced that we are opening a new high school on the Hudson Valley Community College campus in September. Our P-TECH and Early College High School programs will serve incoming ninth graders in Albany, Columbia, Greene, Rensselaer, Schenectady, Schoharie, and Southern Saratoga counties. Students can earn up to 63 college credits at no cost and prepare for careers in computer information systems, engineering, environmental science, and health sciences. Families are invited to join our next session at 6 p.m. on March 30.

Throughout the past year, I also asked staff to look for silver linings. There continue to be many. Families are together. People are thinking about their health and happiness. Society has recognized the importance of our teachers and schools. This crisis has demonstrated the power of humanity, relationships, and working together – the essence of a BOCES.

Our town halls have also been one of the silver linings of the pandemic. What initially started as a way to share information about our response to closure has morphed into something broader – and more valuable. I believe these sessions have allowed us to build community – and to come together in a way that connected us to our mission and each other like never in our history.

Please continue to do your part to limit the spread of COVID-19 and contact your supervisor, Craig, me or COVID19@questar.org with any questions or concerns. Thanks to your efforts, the number of positive cases has decreased. In fact, the region’s test positivity rate has remained below 2 percent for three straight weeks. We also encourage you to make a vaccination appointment if you intend to get vaccinated. However, I caution you NOT to let your guard down – the pandemic is not over. This week, we learned about two school districts in our region with multiple
Within our BOCES we were notified of the following positive cases since last Friday’s email:

- New Visions student. Last on campus on March 5th. No contact tracing required.
- Rensselaer Educational Center student. Last campus on March 9th. Contact tracing was required.

Please email COVID19@questar.org with any future interview nominations, questions, or any student/staff accomplishments. I will be joined by Amanda Chodaba, who is a behavior specialist in our special education department.

In closing, I want to leave you with a quote by one of my favorite authors Robert Frost: “The best way out is through.”

We have endured and stayed the course by going through the pandemic together – and addressing the various questions, concerns, and disruptions as they occurred. I hope you will continue to reflect on the experience and how it can make us stronger, smarter, and more collaborative. We have learned a lot of how to stay safe and keep others safe.

As a BOCES, we continue to look ahead to the future to develop and evolve programs and services that align with the needs of our students, districts, and communities. We know that COVID-19 has, in many ways, disrupted the paradigm and we need to be thoughtful about planning for and getting beyond the pandemic. Together, we will not only get through this public health crisis, but we will seize the opportunity to learn from our experiences to make our BOCES, districts and public education system stronger.

I am honored and humbled by the additional work you have done this past year, and your creativity, flexibility, and patience.

Our stakeholders continue to express their appreciation for your efforts. Thanks to you, we have done more than just preserve and protect, we have expanded opportunities and partnerships in support of our students and districts.

Have a great weekend and stay safe!

Gladys

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